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The Professional Struggles of Contemporary Korean Women: Origins and Consequences of the Glass Ceiling

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Abstract

The status of women globally, though improved in recent decades, remains an unresolved issue. The labor market, in which women must contend with the glass ceiling phenomenon, is an indicative microcosmos of a larger issue—the persistence of discriminatory attitudes toward women. The case is even more profound in East Asian contexts, such as South Korea. The existing literature is limited and focuses on either specific aspects of the glass ceiling or particular industries in Korea. This paper explores the origins and interconnected causes of the glass ceiling in Korea, which include Confucian philosophy and values. Moreover, by analyzing testimonials of Korean female professionals, this analysis reveals the real-life and psychological effects of the glass ceiling and various mechanisms these women utilize to cope with or fight against this invisible barrier in the workplace. One of the most substantial issues these women face is the binary choice they are forced to make: between having a career and having a family. Looking towards a solution, this research also discusses possible ways to shatter the glass ceiling. In exploring the difficult challenges that Korean women contend within the workplace, this research hopes to open up further dialogue and bring more attention to this pressing issue.

Keywords: glass ceiling, South Korea, women, workforce, labor market, East Asia

The Professional Struggles of Contemporary Korean Women: Origins and Consequences of the Glass Ceiling.

Park Hye-rin is a 33-year-old female entrepreneur who founded her company Energy Nomad in 2014. A *New York Times* article titled "Blocked in Business, South Korean Women Start Their Own" describes how she was treated in the working world:

In order to move from the design stage of the company's product to manufacturing, Ms. Park started to hire engineers with experience in operating a factory. In South Korea, those workers tend to be middle-aged men . . . As Ms. Park's meeting with her senior operations manager progressed, he dropped the honorifics in the Korean language appropriate for a chief executive and instead addressed Ms. Park as if she were a younger subordinate. (Schuman, 2019)

This incident is one of many described by the Korean female entrepreneurs who were interviewed for this article. Their stories demonstrate the labyrinth that Korean female professionals must navigate while trying to climb their way up the corporate ladder. Even when they do find ways to shatter the glass ceiling and establish their businesses, they still face challenges that their male counterparts will probably never have to deal with.

Indeed, Korean women are underrepresented in executive, managerial, and leadership positions in the workforce. Only 2 percent of South Korean firms' corporate boards of directors are female (Stangarone, 2019). The economist's glass-ceiling index for 2019 also indicates that among the "The OECD countries with the worst environments for working women tend to be in Asia." According to this index, Korea is ranked last in terms of working environment for women.

Specific percentages point towards this problematic hierarchy: "Boards of directors at publicly traded South Korean firms are 98% male; out of 109 companies, only one has a female boss. Just over one in ten managerial positions in the country are held by women" (The glass ceiling index, n.d). This fact is puzzling when we consider the data about women's tertiary education attainment and their workforce participation rate. In 2019 women's tertiary education attainment rate stood at 44.6 percent, and the number of women entering the workforce has been increasing steadily from 2008 to 2019 when it stood at about 53 percent (So, 2019). The female workforce is composed of educated and skilled women, but they are hardly represented in upper-level management positions.

This phenomenon has profound implications for Korean women. Those who face the glass ceiling often opt to leave the labor market, usually after giving birth to their first child, and encounter obstacles that hinder them from returning to the workforce once their kids are grown. According to Kim, (2019) "There is a growing trend for women not to marry and not to have children"; this trend is quite alarming as Korea is facing a low birth rate which was, according to the world bank (n.d) as low as 0.98 in 2018. The low birth rate indicates that Korea is struggling to maintain a stable population and that its future workforce is shrinking. Therefore, the issue of women's exclusion in the workforce is not merely an economic matter but bears significant social implications. Low birth rate issues are not specific only to Korea in East Asia. Japan, a close neighbor, is also struggling with prospects of a shrinking workforce and an aging population—a phenomenon occurring for similar reasons as Korea (Jones, 2020).

The subject of women's marginalization from high-level positions is important on a global scale as it addresses issues of equality and women's rights still prevalent in the 21st century. In terms of the Asia Pacific, the issue of gender inequality in South Korea is not merely ethical or moral but also has significant economic and social implications. If the future of two of East Asia's most robust economies and workforces is unclear, then the entire region could be affected.

While the glass ceiling hinders women around the globe from advancing freely to executive leadership positions, in Korea, this obstacle is even more substantial. First and foremost, my Capstone project demonstrates how Korean female professionals face the glass ceiling—a significant obstacle that excludes them in organizational settings and thwarts their upward mobility. Second, this examines those cultural systems and forces that have created, shaped, and helped to perpetuate the Korean glass ceiling. These include Confucianism, Chaebols, military service, and various employment paradigms. Third, this research explores how this group of women experience and react to this phenomenon. By analyzing their coping mechanisms and complex emotional responses to the glass ceiling— both in general and in an East Asian context— we can better understand how they navigate challenges in the professional world. Policy and decision-makers, as well as human resource professionals, need to design effective policies and interventions to help these women find their way upwards and break through this ceiling of invisible glass.

The Invisible Barrier to Female Professional Advancement

First, it is essential to define and clarify the fundamental concept in this paper — the "Glass Ceiling." The "Glass Ceiling" — a term used to describe the obstacles facing women on

their way up the corporate ladder—is universally recognized. The grim reality for highly educated and skilled women is that it is more challenging than men to advance professionally and assume managerial positions. This phenomenon can be found in almost every country. However, in South Korea (Korea, hereafter), women seem to be far behind compared to other OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) nations.

A more specific examination of Asia is needed to understand better the origins and factors related to the glass ceiling. This project addresses several significant gaps. A primary focus here is to build on previous studies that propose the story of Asian females is different and should be considered within the unique context of collectivistic, Confucianist, masculine, and male-dominated societies (Rowley, Kang & Lim, 2016). Moreover, since the research about East Asian females is limited and neglects certain unique factors, there is a need to focus on this group when investigating gender issues, especially when it comes to work culture, due to the unique settings and cultural norms of various organizations. This is true even more specifically when discussing Korea. Though it shares many commonalities with other East Asian societies, it still has some unique, distinguishing features such as *chaebols* and military service. To create analytic depth and focus, this project is dedicated only to investigating female Korean professionals.

Finally, most of the research found on the glass ceiling in Korean context is mainly focused on either proving the existence of glass ceiling in the labor market (Shik & Suyoung, 2018) or dedicated to specific industries such as hotel and service industries (Lee, 2017) or civil service (Choi & Park, 2014). This research provides a more comprehensive investigation of the

Korean glass ceiling's origins and roots and synthesizes its interconnected web of causes and effects.

The Origins of Korea's Omnipresent Glass Ceiling

The glass ceiling is a universal issue, and it is essential to acknowledge that women around the globe face this obstacle daily. To be sure, we are still far from reaching gender equality in general and in the workforce, specifically. Certain factors, however, make this glass ceiling an even more substantial barrier for women in Korea. This section unpacks the specific factors that strengthen the contemporary glass ceiling in Korea, discussing its origins and how it was shaped. In particular, we must go back in history and discuss the ancient Confucian philosophy that heavily influenced Korea: Confucianism.

Confucianism

Korean society is ingrained with Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, which have both had lasting effects since the beginning of the Chosun dynasty in the late 14th century (1392-1897) (Cho & Kang, 2017). Confucius himself did not mention women extensively in his teaching, but when he did mention women, they were "compared to people of 'base condition': 'inferior men' in other words." This assertion was a way of "suggesting that women are to be forgotten, ignored" (Gao, 2003). Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism call for a clear hierarchical order of the sexes, and value the chaste woman: "In the strict family hierarchy of Confucianism, women are expected to obey and respect men's authority," and the chaste woman will usually be confined to her home — the inner, or domestic sphere (Young-Hee, 2001). The notion of women's inferiority to men was so ingrained that women themselves internalized it, as can be seen in Pan Zhao's writing. Gao (2003) offers the example of "Pan Zhao, daughter of a famous scholar and a

devoted disciple of Confucious," whose book (Precepts for Women), demonstrated her strong belief in women's submission and self-effacement before the authority of father and husband:

In truth, as far as knowledge goes, a woman need not be extraordinarily intelligent. As for her speech, it need not be terribly clever. As for her appearance, it need not be beautiful or elegant; and for her talents, they need only be average . . . This is why the Nuixian says 'If a wife is like a shadow or an echo, how can you fail to praise her?' (qtd. in Kristeva, 1974:86) (Gao, 2003)

These days, the contemporary chaste woman is not expected to be locked in her home; instead, she is not encouraged to pursue leadership roles that call for visibility, assertiveness, and superiority to the men who report to her. When the cultural norms do not encourage and even prevent women from pursuing managerial positions two factors might be affected. First, the organizational environment and setting might not be adequately designed to encourage women to achieve their professional aspirations. Second, women's psyche is also affected as they internalize these norms and even if they do not they will probably be hesitant to challenge them.

Relational Capital

The Confucian values that shaped the Korean society and culture called for a strict hierarchy in which men were on top. Those power relations that kept women confined to the inner sphere hindered their ability to establish relational capital. Relational capital "refers to the quality and quantity of one's network in family, educational, and regional ties" (Chaudhuri et al., 2019). According to Cho et al. (2015), peer relationships are essential in this society, making relational capital "a key element in leadership and career advancement." Relational capital is tied to the Korean concept of *Yongo*, which "is the term for personal relationships in Korea that are attached to affiliation to an informally organized group . . . derives its main cohesion power from strong

particularistic ties, based on kin, educational institution (school/university) and region" (Horak, 2014). Whereas people cannot control their familial origin (Kin) and the region that they were born in, they do have control over the institutions with which they affiliate, such as the educational system or military units. So it can be argued that one of ways that women can possibly establish relational capital is through belonging to institutions, such as universities or military units. As such, we must examine how gender issues are framed within the context of Korean men's mandatory military service.

Military Service

For about three decades starting in 1961, leaders with military backgrounds ruled Korea. During that time, General Park initiated his five-year economic development plans. The military conscription of males "has solidified a patriarchal culture at national and organizational levels" (Cho & Kang, 2017). Women were first allowed to join the military in 1950 during the Korean War, mainly holding administrative and support positions (Hong, 2002). Years later, in 1990, women were eligible to submit applications and study in three military academies previously exclusive to men. In recent years, though women can join the military, their numbers are significantly lower than men; women are restricted from applying to some combat roles, and the majority of them feel discriminated against on a daily basis (Kim, 2014). It is difficult to get the official number of women in the Korean military. However, according to army-technology website, the United Press International (UPI) reported that in 2018 from a total of 560,000 troops, only 6,915 were women, a little more than one percent. For comparison, in the US active duty army, 16 percent of the troops were women (Reynolds & Shendruk, 2018; Shim, 2016).

An interesting example of women's discrimination can be found in a story from 2014, featuring The Korea Air Force Academy. The academy traditionally grants academic awards to the graduating seniors, but in this instance granted "the presidential prize, not to the valedictorian but to the salutatorian . . . he had performed better than the valedictorian in nonacademic areas like physical fitness and leadership, and in military studies." Nevertheless, many Koreans believe the prize was not given to the valedictorian that year since she was a woman (Kim, 2014). Besides the fact that this story demonstrates the glass ceiling within the military it also shows that even at the beginning of their military service journey, women are not treated equally and their exceptional performances are not being acknowledged. Given those conditions why would women opt to join the military and consider it as an optional career path?

The military service provides opportunities to enter or establish new networks that will serve later in life in the organizational context—either by forming strong bonds during the rigorous training sessions or by being a part of the same unit's alumnus (such as in the university). Furthermore, during the military service, the soldiers receive both leadership training and many opportunities to perfect and exercise those skills during military drills or leadership roles as part of the soldiers' postings. Since women are less inclined to join the military service—mainly because of its patriarchal and discriminative nature—they are less exposed to these upward mobility mechanisms, which in turn makes it harder to advance later in organizational settings. In contrast, men can take advantage of the opportunities to enter or establish new networks that will serve them later in life in the organizational context. Since women are restricted in this specific arena, their networking possibilities are also restricted.

Chaebols

The restrictions placed on women arise from an interconnected web of cultural and social systems. Confucianism not only informs relational capital possibilities and military systems but has also had a significant role in the formation of Korea's famous conglomerates — the *chaebols*. The *chaebols* were created before Korea's giant economic leap by few founding families. However, it was General Park and his resource mobilization that made them as big and powerful as they are today. Mobilizing, engaging, and harnessing the entire nation to the project of modernization and economic growth was probably enabled due to the Confucian legacy that taught the Korean people and society the concepts of loyalty, conformism, and harmony. The government's unprecedented support and market reforms that benefited only the *chaebols* were possible due to Confucian values that advocated hierarchy and submission.

A unique feature of the Korean labor market is the *chaebol*, a large family-owned business conglomerate. The *chaebol's* roots were in Korea's rapid industrialization period when General Park encouraged and promoted large businesses, following his seizure of power in 1961. The *chaebol* played a crucial role in Korea's economic development, and in return, they earned strong support and ties with the government, ties that have remained strong even now. Due to their size, power, and close relationships with the government, they still play a primary role in Korea's current labor market. Ensuring one's place in one of these conglomerates is an aspiration shared by many employees. The *chaebol's* organizational culture was heavily influenced by the Confucian values General Park utilized in his regime, and especially strong was the metaphor of the family and values of filial piety (Yoon, 2018). The organizational setting was compared to a family structure that called for employees to show loyalty to and sacrifice to their organization

and superiors, and at the same time treated "women as the 'youngest daughters' in the company' family'"— a marginalized position. According to Yoon (2018), "Under the Park military regime, the "right" place for women was in the home, not the workplace, and accordingly, young, single women provided post-war factories with a highly exploitable supply of temporary labour." Yoon (2018) demonstrates how even after the structural changes *chaebols* went through after the 1997 crisis, they are still characterized as paternalistic organizations marginalizing women and perpetuating gender discrimination.

In her Master's thesis, Um (2014) framed *chaebols* as a type of "militarized" workplace due to their "rigid hierarchies and male-only informal networking marginalize women, and demand for overwork undermines women's possibility of long-term employment." Um investigated why young women (that still do not have kids) opt to leave coveted "high-paying, high prestige jobs early in their career." She found that "Rigid hierarchies and male-only informal networking marginalize and isolate women." In other words, *chaebols'* settings enable the existence of the glass ceiling. Because *chaebols* are such a prominent component of the Korean labor market, the glass ceiling might be stronger there than in other countries. Considering the centrality, power and significance the *chaebols* have in the Korean labor market and their close ties with the government, it is not surprising they produce a strong effect. Their impact, when combined with the influence of the military system, is found in one of Um's interviews:

> Minjung, who explained that her superiors demanded that she talk in this particular way in the office: The company strongly urged military way of talking—*danaka*. When I didn't use it, they said, 'Am I your friend?' I think they wanted to apply the military

> culture to the company. They would often tell me to "go to the army." I think that's what they wanted from me, to do as they say right away, without talking back. (Um, 2019)

While elements such as Confucianism and the military service can also be applied to other East Asian and Western societies, where they are detrimental to women, the *chaebols* are a unique factor that set Korea apart in terms of how gender discrimination gets carried out and enforced.

Work Culture

Korea's *chaebols* and their employment practices, among other cultural and social factors, are an essential contributor to shaping the country's work culture. Korea's work culture is characterized by long working hours (ranked second in OECD in 2016). In addition there is the after-work hours gathering (usually in the form of drinking parties). Korea's collectivistic nature facilitates a sense of group identity and promotes values of loyalty and allegiance to the group or organization. Organizations that want to establish and strengthen the harmony between employees encourage after-hours gatherings, which revolve around drinking and informal socializing but also allow for discussion of job-related issues. Women (mostly married and mothers) usually do not join these gatherings as they must head home to be with their families and take care of home responsibilities; thus, they are excluded from this network and are left out of essential decision-making processes. Men, in turn, tend to regard women colleagues as uncooperative and not loyal to the company due to their absence from those gatherings (Rowley & Paik, 2009). Again, we can see how the gender hierarchy embedded in Confucianism manifests itself even in modern and contemporary work culture and the individuals operating in this culture. In turn, women are trapped in a situation in which they are obliged to choose between family or career: a binary choice.

Chung & Yoon (2014) refer to social drinking as another glass ceiling. Though it might be a woman's conscious choice or personal preference not to participate in social drinking, it is still, in a way, imposed on her due to her domestic responsibilities, which men are mostly free from. Minjung, one of Um's (2019) interviewees explained why she had to pretend she likes drinking:

> Don't bend-drink … He's giving you the glass, and you're not finishing it? The atmosphere is that you are complimented on how well you drink. If you're not good at it, you're bad at social life. And when you become the weak, you are more prone to bullying. To pretend I wasn't weak, I said, 'Ah! Good!' I knew that, if I didn't drink, I would get into a more difficult position. I drank thinking it was work. Drinking was part of my salary. (Um, 2019)

The long working hours, the after-work socializing, the inadequate training and mentoring options for women managers are hindering women from assuming leadership positions, especially if they are interested in getting married and having kids. Rowely et al. (2016) investigated the influence of organizational (training, mentoring, organizational culture etc') and individual factors (work-family conflict and masculinity) on female manager career success; in their study, they found that the organizational factors had a more significant effect on the career success of women managers than individual factors. They suggest that the exclusion of women from key positions prevents their access to "participate in training and development programs." Also, they found that it was challenging for female managers to find female mentors (Rowely et al., 2016). When female executives are scarce, it only makes sense that it will be harder to find such mentors. Being mentored is also a challenge due to time and responsibilities conflict. According to Kang and Rowely (2005), "Women also faced limitations due to the lack of

networking with core male colleagues and mentoring relationships as they did not have enough time to develop or expand social networks due to domestic responsibilities."

At the same time, there is a lack of institutional support for women who would like to pursue a career even after they get married and become mothers as good quality state-supported daycares are quite rare. Korea has progressed tremendously since the 1960s; it went through rapid industrialization, democratization, and economic crisis in a relatively short period. Women also experienced changes during this period, and they became more active in the public sphere, more educated and present in the labor market. However, one thing seems to be more difficult to change: a woman's traditional gender role in Korean society. A woman is still expected to be the primary person responsible for family and home duties. Korean women are expected to be wives and mothers and, in a way, still adhere to the Neo-Confucian role of the chaste woman. This conflict between women's skills and abilities and restrictive gender role's expectations lies at the heart of this barrier of glass, which keeps Korean women from realizing certain opportunities.

The Effects of the Glass Ceiling on Korean Female Professionals

As women negotiate this cultural paradigm of gender, they respond—and are impacted—in a number of ways. Patton and Haynes (2014) maintained that the effects the glass ceiling has on women were "long-standing and far-reaching." The glass ceiling effect refers to the phenomenon of workplace discrimination, one that is not always carried out in straightforward ways, but is somewhat more implicit and uses various mechanisms to marginalize women and prevent them from advancing to executive and leadership positions. This section focuses on forms of workplace discrimination and marginalization and their effects on women.

Wage Gap

First, an objective and absolute measure of institutional discrimination is the gender wage gap. Korea's gender wage gap is one of the highest in the OECD: "In 2018, the female to male earnings ratio was 66.6 percent, which indicates that female workers earn about 66.6 percent of what male workers earn on average" (So, 2019). In general, if the rates of women hired and promoted for managerial positions are lower than the rate of men, it only makes sense that they will be paid less. Cabeza, Johnson, and Tyner (2011) concluded that the glass ceiling, along with maternity leave and motherhood leave "have discriminatory effects that prevent women from obtaining equal treatment and remuneration in the workplace."

Job Satisfaction

While the wage gap is quantifiable, job satisfaction and the motherhood dilemma are factors that are subjective and relative to the individual. These significant issues have a profound impact on the lives and psyches of Korean women, contributing to the complicated and almost impossible situation they are put in when they try to balance and navigate their personal and professional aspirations.

Different individuals have different preferences and priorities when it comes to the workplace. Some value rewards, others might prefer the sense of challenge and professional growth, while some will focus on schedule flexibility or work culture. No matter which specific values or factors are evaluated, whenever one's needs and expectations are not being answered, it will probably affect one's sense of satisfaction at the workplace.

What is job satisfaction? According to Spector (1997), Job satisfaction is "simply how people feel about their jobs and different aspects of their jobs. It is the extent to which people

like (satisfaction) or dislike (dissatisfaction) their jobs." Job satisfaction is a significant factor that impacts employee motivation, well-being, and retention. When the level of an employee's job satisfaction is relatively low, there is a greater chance that her performance will be affected, and she might be more inclined to leave her workplace. For women who are interested in professional advancement, not having promotion opportunities in their workplace will impede their level of job satisfaction. Park Hee-eun, principal at the venture-capital firm Altos Ventures in Seoul that was interviewed in *The New York Times* article mentioned previously said:

> In education we are equal to men, but after we enter into the traditional companies, they underestimate and undervalue women . . .Women are disappointed with the working culture, so they want to make their own companies. (Schuman, 2019)

Women who are dissatisfied with their current organization may look for new opportunities in other organizations. However, the prevalence of the glass ceiling means that looking for a new organization does not guarantee these women will find what they are looking for in the new organization. Finding an organization that will hire women for managerial or executive positions might not be so easy in Korea as many of the workplaces are male-dominated and adhere to dominant cultural norms.

Fortunately, a recent study conducted by Siegel et al. (2019) indicates an alternate solution. In their research, they investigated foreign companies operating in Korea. They suggested these companies might have a relative advantage since as "outsiders," they are not obliged to accommodate the host market's norms and, therefore, can utilize the female candidate pool better than local companies. Their findings supported this hypothesis—foreign companies not only did hire more women for managerial positions but also demonstrated higher ROA

(return on asset) due to their non-discriminatory hiring policy. In their paper, they quote former South Korean President Kim Dae Jung saying, "I believe foreign-owned companies have less gender discrimination and put more focus on people's individual qualities regardless of gender. Domestic companies have more of a male culture (Siegel et al., 2019). Though this might be an optional solution for women to avoid the glass ceiling in local companies, it has a limited scale and relies on outside companies rather than transforming the values of local ones. As such, this cannot provide a comprehensive solution for the many women struggling to get promoted or be hired to managerial positions.

To Be or Not to Be (a Mother)

Compounding the difficulties for women to fulfill their professional goals is the complex dilemma of marriage and motherhood. This becomes clear when we examine one of the issues most pressing for Korea: its demographic change. Since Korean women know that once they get married and give birth, their chances of coming back to their old position in the organization, let alone be promoted, are slim, some of them choose not to get married and give birth. This phenomenon is quite prevalent and sometimes referred to as the "Sampo Generation. The word "sampo" means to give up three things—relationships, marriage and children".(Maybin, 2018). There are indeed various other factors that contribute to the decline in fertility rate in general and in Korea specifically. Social factors such as increase legitimacy of abortion and birth control pill and structural changes as urbanization that lead to an increase of living and education costs are some factors to consider. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the importance of the labor market changes when it comes to this trend. The unfavorable labor market, work culture, and gender

inequality in the workplace have significant effects on the decision not to have kids or have fewer kids. Gaya's interview demonstrates this point:

> There were four women in the same cohort who worked for 7 years in my company and haven't been promoted since. When they were finally promoted, they all got pregnant at the same time. They have been saving pregnancy for promotion all those years. (Um, 2019)

Anderson & Kohler (2015) maintain that in second-wave developers (countries that experienced rapid industrialization in the mid-twentieth century) such as Korea, the low fertility rate is associated with the gap between the rapid institutional gender equity (such as in the education and labor markets) and much slower family-oriented gender equity. This progression mismatch results in a widespread work–family conflict mainly experienced by women. In Korea, on one hand, women have greater opportunities than in the past to attain higher education and participate in the labor market, but, on the other hand, they are still bound to old traditional, Confucian norms and values that expect them to assume the motherhood role that dictates they are solely responsible for all household and child rearing activities. This double burden can put a lot of strain on women, especially when faced with the demanding Korean work culture so they either find it hard to advance professionally (hence the glass ceiling) or they are forced to make a decision and choose between motherhood and career. Go-sun, 50 years old shares thoughts about this dilemma in retrospect:

> It would be perfect if a woman could have both a nice career and a nice family, but that's an almost impossible dream. If I am to choose between a successful career and a family life, I will choose, again, my family life. (Kim, 2009. p.146)

Jang Yun-hwa, 24-year-old, a much younger woman just starting her professional life, illustrates the tension between family and career: "I have no plans to have children, ever . . . I don't want the physical pain of childbirth. And it would be detrimental to my career . . . Rather than be part of a family, I'd like to be independent and live alone and achieve my dreams." (Maybin, 2018)

The last two personal quotes from different generation women demonstrate quite vividly the attitude change Korean women were and are going through. Both women are very decisive about their choices and seem as if they are content and have no remorse, but the description of their choice shows they had to choose one thing over another. Though there is a 20 years gap between those two women, it is interesting and quite sad to see and realize that not much has changed for Korean women, and they still need to decide between a career and a family.

Shattering the Korean glass ceiling(?)

So where do we go from here? The glass ceiling is a global phenomenon that exists in many societies. This paper focuses on South Korea since the current research about this country is limited and does not provide a comprehensive assessment of the phenomenon's origins and effects. This research addresses these limitations and explores the social and cultural systems and forces that shape this ceiling and its effects on Korean female professionals and the society as a whole.

Looking back at Korea's history, we can identify the roots of women's discrimination in the Confucian philosophy. Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism adhere to a strict hierarchy and power relations where women are located at the bottom, expected to obey and accept men's authority (Gao, 2003; Young-Hee, 2001). A society ingrained with Confucian values will form its institutions, norms, and systems in a way that adheres to these sets of beliefs. This Confucian

influence is quite apparent and intertwined into Korea's culture and institutions: the power hierarchy that excludes and prevents them from forming meaningful, significant networks that later hinders them from climbing the corporate ladder; the patriarchal structure of the military that discourages women from joining its ranks and causes them to miss out on important opportunities to acquire leadership skills and establish beneficial networks. Confucian values enable the creation of one of Korea's most prominent actors in the labor market, the *chaebols*, and influence their male-dominated organizational culture, which, in turn, influences the nation's work culture. This employment paradigm primarily serves men and tends to exclude women. The strict adherence to traditional gender roles means that women are expected to get married and have kids; once they do, they are responsible for house chores and the children's education. Thus women in the workplace usually are perceived as temporary, and when they do get married and have kids, they find it hard to devote the same time at work, so many of them just quit.

Reviewing testimonials from Korean women reveals three main themes and effects of the glass ceiling. First, there is a discriminatory gender wage gap. Women are paid less in general, and more specifically, are paid less than men for the same jobs and roles. While this is an objective and tangible outcome of the glass ceiling, the other two consequences are more subjective and implicit. First, women who feel they cannot fulfill their professional aspirations in their workplace have lower job satisfaction that eventually leads to issues with work performance or departure from the workplace. If one repetitively feels the same way in different workplaces, one might either decide to leave the workforce or try to make peace with the situation and realize they cannot advance. As such, they may stay in the same workplace even though they are discontent or demonstrate poor work performance. Second, these women are

caught in a double bind between their ambitions to advance professionally and climb up the corporate ladder and their aspirations to have a family. The modern Korean workplace, which is still influenced by ancient Confucian beliefs, puts women in an impossible situation in which they cannot have both—a meaningful career and a family. Contemporary Korean women, as opposed to the older generation, now more than ever, are not afraid to choose a career over family. The direction these women decide to take is justified but is also one of the main reasons Korea is facing a low birth rate, which is at odds with the realities and dangers of an aging workforce that might not sustain and economic growth. The effects of the glass ceiling cause Korea's labor market to neglect almost half of its workforce, and if its workforce is aging and diminishing, isn't it crucial to fully utilize the skilled and highly qualified pool of employees that already exists?

How are women reacting to the effects of the glass ceiling? Some opt to exit the workforce and dedicate themselves to motherhood. Others might move between organizations until they would find what they are looking for. Multinational organizations operating in Korea might be an alternative as they are more inclined to hire and promote women for executive positions, as suggested by the research of Siegel et al. (2019).

However, there is also a growing, new option, which has women taking matters into their own hands and creating the opportunities they are looking for by establishing their own businesses. *The New York Times* article titled "Blocked in Business, South Korean Women Start Their Own," describes this recent trend, in which Korean women—frustrated at low prospects for promotion in traditional workplaces—decided to start their own companies. It seems that the number of female entrepreneurs in Korea is increasing in recent years. According to statistical

reports, "the share of Korean female adults engaged in entrepreneurial activity rose from 4 percent in 2013 to 12 percent in 2018, a 200 percent increase" (Buchholz, 2019). Unnikrishnan and Hanna (2019) "analyzed 2014-2016 data from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM)" and found that "the gender gap in founding startups (the percent of men versus women who start a new business) narrowed from 2014 through 2016, with the biggest gains occurring in Turkey, South Korea, and Slovakia." These numbers suggest that women—who are either frustrated from lack of opportunities in their current workplace or skeptical of joining it in the first place—are exploring new creative, dynamic alternatives.

These recent developments point to possible avenues for future research. Foremost, we need an in-depth examination of the motivations of Korean entrepreneurs for starting their own businesses and whether the glass ceiling is a significant factor in their decision to be entrepreneurs. Furthermore, we need a comparative study that focuses on the effectiveness of governmental regulations regarding gender discrimination. Such studies could help shed light on the factors that enable the maintenance of gender discrimination in Korea's labor market, and that lead women towards the entrepreneurial pursuit of their professional goals and dreams.

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